this one's for the faithless, the ones that are surprised

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by hujwernoo

Summary

She sighs, looking around the room again. It’s empty, of course, but that’s going to change in the next day or two. The moving van should get here by early afternoon.

Not for the first time, Vanya wonders what on Earth she’s *doing*.

The process of healing is a long and difficult road. Family can make it easier.

Notes

And now, at last, here it is. The final installment.

See the end of the work for more notes

Vanya trails her hand across the wall, feeling the cool wallpaper under her fingertips.

It's a beautiful room. Large and airy, with a small nook right next to the window where she can sit and look down at the street below. The walls are decorated in a creamy white, with vines of flowers creeping across the room. The floor is hardwood, but there's a vibrant rainbow rug on the floor next to the window. That would be Raithe's addition.

"I thought of you when I saw it!" he said, when he came in and laid it out on the floor. "It was at that fancy furniture store, you know, over on Eighth?"

"Why did you go *there?*" Vanya asked, blinking. "That stuff is more Dad's kind of thing."

"Enngh, there's a restaurant next door," Raithe said casually. "They had some decent nonperishables, and the rug was just, you know, right there, except it was mostly burned by then. But still pretty! And I thought you might like it."

Vanya blinks, and the memory dissipates.

She sighs, looking around the room again. It's empty, of course, but that's going to change in the next day or two. The moving van should get here by early afternoon.

Not for the first time, Vanya wonders what on Earth she's *doing*.

But. Well. She shakes her head and dismisses the thought. Both Raithe and her therapist say that her self-doubt gains more footholds the less certain she is about her decisions. She needs - no, she *wants* to get better at this. At - living.

She leaves the room. Unsurprisingly, she runs into one of her brothers.

"Van!" Klaus says, throwing his arms wide (except his eyes are bright and vibrant, not dull and blank, and there's no deafening crunch and limbs at wrong angles and explosion of blood and -) "How do you like your room? I'm still open to trade, you could get a *lovely* view of the highway."

Vanya can't help but smile. "I thought you said you had all the view you need, what with Dave being in the same room and all."

Klaus' eyes go soft and distant, like they do whenever Dave is mentioned or shows up or just generally….exists. "Well, obviously. But I must register that when we were handing out rooms Dave and I were discussing wedding options, and so clearly we were at a cognitive disadvantage. You all *exploited* us, don't say you didn't. Clearly we would have chosen differently if we weren't distracted."

"Clearly," Vanya says, smiling. "But you were, actually, distracted, and I'm not switching."

Klaus pouts. "Phooey."

Then he instantly bounces back. “Oh well! Were you looking for someone? I think Five is around here somewhere, which means Raithe may be stalking us as we speak. Ben is still giving Dave the shovel talk, so they should be a few more hours.”

“....What is Ben threatening Dave *with?*” Vanya asks. “They’re both already dead.”

“You remember Ben’s Disappointed Looks?” Klaus asks. “Those.”

“Oh,” Vanya blinks. “Oh, poor Dave.”

“There’s also the small chance that Benny could learn to release the Bentacles as a ghost and either rip apart other ghosts into nonexistence or drag them into his bottomless stomach and keep them there for the rest of eternity,” Klaus adds, “But I have expressed my severe disapproval of that plan even *if* Dave somehow breaks my heart. So Disappointed Looks it is.”

“....Of course,” Vanya says, weakly.

“Mmhmm,” Klaus nods absently. Then he shoots her a calculating look, before grabbing her hands and dragging her down the hallway. “Let’s get ice cream!”

Vanya squeaks at the suddenness, but at least nothing rattles. It takes her a moment to parse his words. “Ice cream?” she repeats, bewildered.

“Yes!” Klaus tugs her along, and she keeps up out of sheer inertia. “It’s almost June, we should get started early. There’s only so much ice cream in the world, Vanya, and summer does a big number on the supply. You don’t want to go out for the first time later in the summer and find they’ve run out, do you? You need to get those good memories in early.”

“That, uh - Klaus, wait -”

Klaus does stop pulling her, to his credit, though he doesn’t let go of her hands. He looks at her with big, pleading eyes. “Pleeease?” he says.

(It’s not the same, obviously. His eyes were half-lidded, then, blinking sluggishly, muted with confusion and fear instead of sparking with mischief, and he was choking too much on his own blood to make any recognizable words. She doesn’t know why she thinks of it.)

“I,” Vanya says. She can’t seem to remember her objections. “I, um.”

A flicker of a frown appears on Klaus’ face. He peers at her more closely. “Vanya?”

Vanya can feel her anxiety bubbling up (except she never had anxiety, now did she), and she tugs her hands from Klaus’ and wraps them around herself in an effort to hold it all in. It’s hard, when sometimes she feels like a storm in a bottle, tissue-paper skin tearing at the weight of all the *powerpower**power*** inside of her, straining to burst free. Her heartbeat thunders in her ears, growing louder and louder, demanding she let it out. She can’t, though, can’tcan’tcan’t, not with Klaus right here in front of her looking worried and scared and *covered in blood -*

And then he hugs her.

All of a sudden, the thundering of her heartbeat washes away, and she gasps into his shoulder.

“Um,” Klaus says, sounding uncertain and questioning and *alive.* “Am I doing this right?”

“I -” Vanya says, before taking a shaky breath. Then another one. The third one is slightly steadier, and the fourth one is nearly normal. “Yeah,” she says at last. “Yeah, you are. Thanks.”

Raithe is usually the one who manages her panic attacks. And Five’s. And sometimes Klaus’, though she only knows that because she overheard Raithe giving Dave tips. In fact, Raithe is probably the most put-together person in the entire house, which sees him doing a lot of work to hold the rest of them together.

Not that he doesn’t need help sometimes, too. But any meagre help Vanya could provide pales in comparison to Five, who just has to touch Raithe’s shoulder to snap him out of whatever flashback he drops into (he always goes perfectly, inhumanly still when it happens, like something terrible will happen if he moves so much as a millimeter. It’s strange to see him so still, because he’s Klaus and Klaus is never still, not unless he’s limp and bleeding and -)

Anyways.

“Oh, good,” Klaus says. “I’m living up to myself. Yay me!”

“That’s the spirit,” Vanya huffs. She takes stock of herself, and decides she’s steady enough to disengage from the hug. She extricates herself carefully (can’t set off the bomb now, can we), and looks at Klaus.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets. “So I guess that’s a no to ice cream,” he says mournfully.

“It’s not even eleven,” Vanya points out.

“Ice cream knows no clock,” Klaus says solemnly. “But I *suppose* we can save it for later.”

“I….” Vanya trails off. “No. No, you know what? We can go for ice cream. That sounds nice.”

“What?” Klaus blinks at her. “Really? I mean, far be it for me to dissuade you from ice cream, dear sister, but why the turnaround?”

“....Because. Ice cream,” Vanya says, when she can’t figure out how to say *I want to spend time with you so I can convince myself to stop thinking anytime I experience emotions I’ll look up and see your dead body.*

“Well, I can’t argue with that reasoning,” Klaus decides, then does a twirl. “I’ll get my shoes!”

Vanya takes another deep breath (he's alive, he's alive, he's going to stay that way, it's okay) and follows.

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The new house (she hasn't quite gotten into the habit of thinking of it as 'their' house yet, even though that's technically what it is) is in a quiet part of town. Klaus claims they're right next to a highway, but it's not really much of one, to be honest. There isn't very much traffic around. They're only a mile from the Icarus, so Vanya thinks she might decide to walk there and back during the warmer months.

It has four bedrooms, but Five colonized the basement the moment he laid eyes on it so everyone else had no trouble dividing up the rest of the house. Ben's face at the idea of getting his own room was a sight to behold (although even now, six weeks later, seeing Ben at all still sends a jolt of wonder through her entire being, leaving her breathless). The house was pricey, as Vanya understands it, but of course that isn't actually an issue now.

Vanya is still pretty sure Da-*Reginald's* will did not *actually* leave all his money to all his living children in equal shares (Five and Raithe's smug looks at the reading were kind of a giveaway), but she honestly doesn't care. That bastard took everything away from her, he can at least be the means by which her and her siblings have a place to live.

She's so tired of being alone.

Klaus hands her a cup, interrupting her reflection. The ice cream shop is only a few blocks from the house, which immediately made it Klaus' favorite place. He enjoys bringing back absurdly decadent confections and eating them very slowly in front of Ben, Dave, and Raithe.

"Here you go," Klaus says cheerfully. "One salted-carmel truffle with fudge sauce and whipped cream. You have good taste, Vanya dear, everyone else is *so boring.* Dave's favorite flavor is vanilla. Who likes *vanilla,* I ask you? Honestly. At least he only likes it in ice cream, if he liked it in the bedroom we'd have a serious problem -"

Vanya chokes on her spoonful of ice cream and reaches out to put a hand over Klaus' mouth, mostly on desperate reflex.

It gets him to stop talking for a bare moment, at least, so it's something.

Then he licks her palm. She draws her hand back with a grimace.

"Anyways," Klaus continues blithely, sauntering out of the shop. Vanya trails behind, waving goodbye to the worker. "My point is that clearly you and I are ice cream soulmates. Can I interest you in a bite?"

He waves his spoon, which has a glob of midnight-dark chocolate ice cream mixed with graham cracker, gummy worms, sprinkles, and bits of pineapple, all slathered with caramel and chocolate sauce.

"Maybe later," Vanya says diplomatically.

“More for me, then,” Klaus shrugs, stuffing the spoonful into his mouth. He - for lack of a better word - melts. *“Mmmmm….”*

Vanya smiles to herself and continues eating her own ice cream. It’s good quality, which bodes well for future visits. Which will, by necessity, only involve half the people in the house, but Raithe is very keen to let Five experience normal things during his second childhood.

Not that Vanya has a very good grasp on ‘normal’. She thought she did, before, but it turns out she’s just as extraordinary and just as fucked up as the rest of her family. Just as powerful, only even moreso. She has everything she’s ever wanted. Hallelujah.

Well, she amends, it’s not *all* bad. She never thought she’d get so much as a passing glance from her siblings, and now she’s *living* with three of them (four? she still doesn’t know how to count Raithe). And even if half the reason is to keep an eye on her burgeoning powers, the other half is because they don’t want her to feel alone. If training her was all they wanted to do, they wouldn’t have bought a *house.*

Speaking of….

“Did Luther and Allison say when they’d be coming in from L.A. for the housewarming party?” Vanya asks Klaus.

He looks up from he’s licking ice cream off his fingers. “Mm? Oh, maybe. Who can remember, really. Diego and Mom are going to come at seven, I know that much. Diego’s classes run till six-thirty, and his new apartment isn’t *that* far away.”

Vanya nods. In hindsight, it was very obvious that as soon as Diego had the means he would enroll in electrical engineering classes so that he could learn how to take care of Mom. Pogo was….very gracious about offering to teach him about Mom in particular once he had enough of a foundation to understand, considering what that implied about their trust in Pogo.

But. Well. Vanya stopped trusting Pogo the moment she remembered that *fucking* cell.

She feels the stirring of her power, and closes her eyes to center herself. Deep breaths. In and out. In and out. Feel the sounds all around you, let them flow through you without interruption. Don’t let them stick to your insides and balloon up until they burst, just let them pass on through.

Alright. Alright.

She opens her eyes, and sees Klaus solemnly contemplating her while sucking on his fingers.

“Should I offer hugs when I’m all sticky?” he wonders. “I’m given to understand that’s….rude? Or something?”

“I’d prefer you not,” Vanya says. “I like this outfit.”

“Noted,” Klaus says. He scoops up more ice cream and immediately recoats his hands.

They wander down the block, not in any particular hurry. Vanya takes the time to look around at the other houses in the neighborhood. They're all neatly kept, with bright paint and mowed lawns and large trees. Some have gardens full of flowers, only a few stragglers still recovering after winter. A few people are out and about as well, going places or just enjoying the spring.

Her eyes catch on some children's toys in a yard. The corner of her mouth turns up.

"Hey," she says to Klaus. "What do you want to bet Five gets kid's toys for our birthday?"

Klaus grins. "I've already picked them out."

A laugh bubbles up inside of her, and she sees no reason to suppress it. She lets it out, and it's - *probably* just her imagination that's telling her it's too loud and she should be quieter.

Klaus doesn't seem to mind, anyways, and he bounces along next to her (gangly and flailing and limbs everywhere, but not jerky or stuttering or desperate, not like then). He points out bits of interesting things as they pass by, and spends three whole minutes inspecting a garden gnome.

"I've never seen one before!" he protests as she drags him away by the arm. "At least not in an *actual garden.* It's weird! Although come to think of it, those probably weren't real garden gnomes, that looks very uncomfortable to use as a -"

"*Please* don't finish that sentence," Vanya begs him.

"Only for you, Vanya," Klaus says, fluttering his eyelashes.

Vanya shakes her head, and can't repress a smile. She looks up, and nudges Klaus to the side when she sees an elderly Asian woman coming down the sidewalk in their direction.

"I'm actually not sure what to get Five for our birthday," she confesses to Klaus. "It's - he's so different. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I'm the wrong Klaus to be asking about that," he points out. "But, hm, you know that pouch of his? It's full of stupid little things, basically junk. But Raithe gave them to him, so they're pretty much the most important things he owns. Just make him something. Something small, so that he can carry it around. I don't think he's used to having a stable storage space yet."

"Oh," Vanya says, surprised. "Oh, that makes sense. Thanks." She finishes off her ice cream and crowds to the side as the old woman gets close enough to see the sharp, severe lines spread across her face like a spiderweb. "Making something for Five would actually be interesting, maybe I can record me playing a song. I was thinking last week that he might like -"

The elderly woman draws even with them. Very suddenly, without warning, she smoothly pivots on one leg, sticks out her foot, and trips Klaus. As he falls, her hand flashes out and punches him square in the face.

Klaus yelps and tumbles backwards, head snapping to the side. The woman then turns to Vanya, faster than anyone should be able to move but especially a senior citizen, and also punches her in the face.

Vanya also shrieks and falls backwards. Her hands come up to cover her face and *what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck* and she *yanks* on her power and her heartbeat *roars* to life and she can feel the tremor under her feet -

- and she opens her eyes and sees Klaus on the ground, moving gingerly and sluggishly and not at all normally and there's blood there's blood his face is covered with it it's everywhere he's dead he's dying she did this it's her fault her fault she killed him she killed him she killed him no no no please *no* -

"Vanya? Vanya, he's fine, you're fine, we're all fine, I promise. No one's hurt, Vanya, just listen to me, I'm right here, he's fine, he's not hurt, Vanya, I promise he's fine, can you hear me? He's not hurt, he's fine, I'm fine -"

She blinks, and - and her heartbeat slips away and it feels like her head is stuffed full of cotton. The ground stops trembling.

Someone is hugging her.

Someone is hugging her.

Someone is -

Raithe is hugging her.

"Can you breathe for me, Vanya?" Raithe asks gently. "Like this, just breathe. In," he sucks in a breath, "Out." and expels it.

She follows his instructions. He knows how to do this, he's done it before. And she can follow instructions. She's good at that.

It takes a minute for her breathing to stabilize, and Raithe continues hugging her. That's probably a good thing. She still feels like she'll fly apart into a million pieces without anyone to hold her together. She wants to apologize for making him do it, but the last time she did that he told her he *loves* getting to hug people whenever he wants, so she's actually doing him a favor. She's not entirely sure she believes him, but she has to admit it does sound like something he would like.

"I'm okay," Vanya says at last.

"Oh goodie," Raithe says. He doesn't let go of her, but he does rearrange himself so that she isn't pressed against his chest anymore. "Well, you're a step above everyone else here, then."

"I'm perfectly fine," says Five's voice.

Vanya blinks, and looks around.

She and Raithe are sitting on the grass just off the sidewalk. To the left is Klaus, and her heartbeat jumps to see the amount of blood on his shirt, but the deeply annoyed glare on his face offsets it. Granted, she can only see half, because he's holding his shirt up to his nose to stem the flow of blood from it.

The subject of his glare is standing a dozen or so feet away. Contrary to Vanya's half-expectations, the elderly woman hasn't magically transformed into Leonard or an assassin or - or - Reginald, or someone. She's just looking at them with a disproportionate amount of calm. Five is planted in front of all of them, glaring her down.

"Are you okay, Vanya? Klaus?" Five says. His voice is perfectly, utterly even, not a single hitch or hint of emotion. It's a bit incongruous next to the sheer *rage* that suffuses his features.

"Ugh," Klaus says. "No, I am *not.* I love this shirt!"

"It was so nice," Raithe agrees sadly.

"We're fine, Five," Vanya answers. "I, um. What just…."

"Good question," Five snarls. Somehow, the hatred in his glare doubles. Vanya can't decide which is stranger - seeing it on her brother's thirteen-year-old face, or seeing it pointed at an octogenarian. "Care to explain who you are, and why you decided to assault my siblings?"

The woman raises one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. She isn't very tall, but her bearing is full of confidence and poise. She's - very fit, especially for her age. Her eyes are a piercing black, hair cut brutally short and the edge of a tattoo sneaking out from under her shirt collar.

"Really, Number Five," she says, and her voice is cool and unruffled. "If I can recognize you after you've lost a few decades, surely you can do the same when I've gained some."

Five blinks, and then his eyes narrow. Raithe stiffens.

"...Trainer," Five says, slowly.

"I go by Marion these days, actually," the woman corrects. "I had to get a real name after you bombed my place of employment."

"Uh," Raithe pipes up, waving a hand. "Actually, that was me."

"I'm shocked," the woman - Marion - says flatly.

"You're still alive, though," Five says, sweeping a look across her. His brow furrows. "Judging by your age, the Facility was located in….'57?"

"55," Marion says mildly. "And thank you *ever* so much for stranding me in that pit of racist filth. All the Briefcases stopped working shortly after Headquarters burned down."

"I'd say sorry, but I'm not, actually," Raithe says.

“Uh,” Klaus says. “What’s going on?”

“What he said,” Vanya says. She looks between Raithe, Five, and Marion.

“Weeeell,” Raithe says, tilting his head. “Marion here - may I call you Marion? - was part of the Commission. She trained us baby assassins into big hotshot assassins who could shoot on their own. She worked at a training facility separate from Commission Headquarters, so she, uh, outlived them. And I’m guessing she went on and had a wonderful life and isn’t angry at us in the least for destroying her old one?”

“Oh,” Vanya breathes.

“I don’t care if she is,” Five says flatly. Then, to Marion, “Make one move and you’re dead. No matter how good you are, your body is long past its prime, and might I remind you we were evenly matched when it was.”

“I bet I could get one good punch in,” Marion says, eyeing Five in much the same way he was earlier. Then she sighs and looks over at Klaus. “I thought you were Raithe, though. There’s that one wasted.”

“Wait,” Raithe says. “Is that all you wanted? To punch us in the face?”

“Like I said,” Marion repeats, *“Pit of racist filth.”*

“What did you punch *me,* though?” Vanya says, bewildered. She gingerly touches her cheek, and winces. That’s going to leave a bruise. A fairly large one, considering how much it’s throbbing. Although she might just have to be thankful her face isn’t broken, because apparently this woman used to train assassins (and may have trained Five and Raithe, which is an even more terrifying thought).

Marion looks at her. Vanya freezes, because there’s a spark of real, genuine hatred in her eyes.

“Hey,” Five snaps, stepping between them. “What’s your problem with Vanya? As far as I know, you’ve never met her. And we stopped the apocalypse, so *don’t* say it’s that.”

Vanya shrinks a little, which seems to happen automatically whenever anyone mentions the apocalypse. Raithe hugs her tighter, and Klaus moves one of his hands over to give hers a squeeze. It’s less reassuring than he probably means it to be, considering the smears of blood on his skin, but she gives him a wobbly smile anyways.

Marion doesn’t move her eyes from Vanya, though.

“No,” she says slowly. “No, that’s not my problem with her.”

“Then what *is,*” Five says. It’s not a question.

Marion’s lips thin. “I didn’t fully introduce myself,” she says. “I wasn’t sure what name to take, after the Commission, so I just eventually decided to keep it simple. Marion Cho.”

For one long, long moment, Vanya doesn't understand.

Then she does.

She sucks in a breath.

"Helen," she says, hears herself saying.

Marion gives the barest incline of her head.

"Helen," she says. "My granddaughter."

"Oh," Klaus mumbles, "Oh shit."

"....Ah," Raithe says.

Vanya closes her eyes.

She didn't - she didn't go to Helen's funeral. She barely interacted with the woman, didn't know her at all. And then there's the fact that Leonard killed her *because of Vanya.* For her *job.* The job Vanya still has, the one she gained only because of her powers, the one Helen worked so hard to get and was amazing at and didn't deserve to die over.

"I'm sorry," Vanya whispers. It's not enough, she knows.

"It wasn't your fault, Vanya," Five says, and someone else would probably think his voice sounds flat but she can hear the subtle undercurrent of reassurance in it.

"Wasn't it?" Marion says bluntly.

"It *wasn't,*" Five snaps. Raithe shifts and rubs Vanya's back. She opens her eyes to see Five glowering at Marion. "She had no idea Peabody would kill Helen Cho. You, on the other hand - why the fuck would you allow any member of your family to come to this city? As far as you knew, we'd fail and it would become Ground Zero."

Marion's face tightens. "Believe me, I asked her not to come here. And she didn't listen, but I figured either you two would fail to prevent the apocalypse or you would save us all, and her geographical location wouldn't matter in either case. I didn't expect her to die in the leadup. You two were always *excellent* at limiting collateral damage."

Raithe flinches, very minutely. Vanya probably wouldn't have noticed it if he wasn't still hugging her.

Five lets out a sound that might be laughter. "Careful, that was almost a compliment."

"It was a fact," Marion says. "One I was foolish to rely on. Rest assured, Number Five, I assign myself an equal share of the blame."

"That's just peachy, *Marion,*" Five says. "And I'm sorry about your granddaughter, really I am. But if you take one more step towards my siblings I'm going to have to come out of

retirement, and trust me, you don't want that."

A razor-thin smile flickers across Marion's face. "Mm. You haven't changed, Number Five."

"No," Five says. "I haven't."

"Uh," Klaus interrupts. "You know, maybe I'm just talking crazy here, but….would it help if you got to say goodbye?"

Everyone looks at him. They blink.

"What?" Vanya says.

"Oh," Raithe says, in a tone of realization. "You're talking about summoning her? Helen?"

Marion's face remains stoic, but Vanya can tell there's a fair amount of shock being suppressed. "What?" she says.

Vanya feels shock rolling through her as well, but she seems to be the only one. Raithe looks completely unbothered, and Five is nodding thoughtfully.

"That sounds fair," Five says. He looks at Raithe. "Do you think you…."

"Probably," Raithe shrugs. "It's easier than a lot of other things, at least."

"Great." Five turns to Marion. "What do you say? You leave my family alone, and in return you get to say goodbye to your granddaughter."

Marion stands very still for several seconds. Then she nods, the barest incline of her head.

Vanya opens her mouth. Closes it.

"Could -" she says, then swallows. "Could I apologize to her? Please?"

"Of course," Raithe says, looking at her, eyes softening. "Of course, Vanya."

Vanya breathes out. "Okay. Okay."

Carefully, she disentagles herself from Raithe, and they stand. Raithe shoots her a smile. She gives a wobbly one back, and goes to stand by Klaus, still wiping at his nose and scowling at how it hasn't quite stopped bleeding. Vanya looks away from the sight and steadies herself.

Raithe closes his eyes and tilts his head. Vanya stares at him intently. She's never seen him actually summon a ghost before. She wonders what it's like on his end. Is it complicated and finicky? Does he experience more time than they do? Does he have to actually search for Helen, or is there some way to find the right ghost immediately? Vanya has had difficulty describing what using her powers is like to other people, and she wonders what kind of sensations Raithe and Klaus' powers cause them to experience.

From everyone else's point of view, however, Raithe simply stands very, very still. He doesn't even breathe, and Vanya is reminded all over again that no matter how alive he looks, Raithe is a ghost (because she killed him). He doesn't need to breathe, or move, or make any minute adjustments in balance living people do constantly. He looks like a startlingly realistic life-sized statue.

After fifteen seconds, he suddenly blinks, and the subtle sensation of eerieness vanishes. Vanya straightens up, her hands coming up to grasp at her arms.

"Why, hello, there," he says, addressing a spot of empty air a bit to his right.

"Lovely to see you again," Klaus adds, his eyes in the same place. He raises a hand and gives a little finger-wave.

Vanya's breath catches in her throat. She sees Marion from the corner of her eye, and the woman could probably give Raithe a run for his money in the statue-impersonation competition.

"Wow," Raithe says, sounding impressed. "You know, that's actually the first time we haven't been mistaken for twins? Mini-me, mark that down."

"On it," Klaus says, and squints up at the sun. He then very seriously sticks his finger in his nose, pulls it out, and uses the blood to write on his arm: *noon: X twins! :P*

Vanya isn't sure whether to be amused or grossed out.

Five shakes his head, looking exasperated but also fond. He glances at Raithe. "Make her corporeal already."

"Fine, fine," Raithe waves a hand.

And then Helen is standing there.

Vanya sucks in a breath. Helen is - she looks just like she did in life, impeccable and professional and coolly aloof. That's….a relief, in some ways. Vanya isn't sure what her reaction would be if the injuries Leonard inflicted on her (because of Vanya) were obvious.

"They can see you now," Raithe tells Helen, nodding at them all.

Helen raises her eyebrows, in that perpetually unamused way she does. Vanya might not have known her that well, but that look is a familiar one.

"Aren't you a miracle worker," Helen says.

"You know, I liked it better back when everyone was deeply impressed and eternally swooning over how amazing my powers are," Raithe complains to Five.

"When was that?" Five smirks.

Raithe pouts.

Helen's eyes find Marion. Then Vanya. She looks between them.

Marion might as well be carved of stone. Vanya isn't sure what she's thinking, but - she doesn't seem to want to speak first.

"H - Helen," Vanya says. Helen's eyes swivel to her, and Vanya shrinks back, feeling just like she did back in the bathrooms of the Icarus.

"Vanya," Helen says after a moment. "You're a really terrible judge of character, you know. I only saw what happened after my death, but that guy was sending up every red flag there is."

"I - yeah," Vanya says, looking down at the ground. "Yeah. I'm - I'm sorry. About what happened to you. I'm so sorry."

She blinks rapidly.

There's a long silence.

"I heard you play," Helen says eventually.

Vanya looks up. She blinks confusedly.

"You're good," Helen says, her eyes boring into Vanya's. "Without those pills, you're really good. Better than me."

"I -" Vanya shakes her head, bewildered. "I - no, I'm not -"

"Don't deny it," Helen says bluntly. "You're better than me. I'm still not okay with being *murdered* for it, but if anyone was going to replace me it's only right that you did. First chair is yours now. Take it seriously."

There's a lump in Vanya's throat, blocking any words that might come out. She can only nod, mutely.

Helen waits for another moment, before nodding back. Then she turns to her grandmother. Her expression - falters, slightly.

"....祖母," Helen says.

Marion looks at her, expression unchanging.

"I told you to take my self-defense lessons," Marion says at last.

"I know," Helen says, her eyes flicking downward slightly before looking back at Marion. "I'm sorry, 祖母."

"I am too," Marion says. She looks at Vanya and her siblings. "May we have a few minutes alone?"

“Sure,” Raithe shrugs. “I can keep you here for maybe fifteen minutes, I think,” he tells Helen.

“Alright,” Helen says. Marion nods, her eyes never straying from her granddaughter.

“Great, let’s go,” Five says, ushering Vanya and Klaus away. “Helen, sorry about your murder, though she has a point about those lessons. That was stupid of you. Trainer, wish I could say it was nice to see you again, but it wasn’t. Don’t come near my family again. *Goodbye.*”

“That was downright diplomatic of you, Five,” Raithe says cheerfully, following them and leaving Marion and Helen facing each other. “My efforts are finally bearing fruit!”

“Ooo, that sounds like a story,” Klaus says, grinning.

“Oh, several,” Raithe says, with an identical grin. Five twitches.

Vanya manages a small smile, listening to the banter. It settles something inside her, the thing that was shaken by summoning Helen and seeing her, speaking to her, hearing - not quite forgiveness, but as close as she’s going to get. Acceptance.

“Hey,” Klaus says, bumping her shoulder. Raithe and Five are arguing about some job of theirs now, something about alligators. Klaus raises an eyebrow. “You okay?”

Vanya thinks it over before answering. To her surprise, she finds the answer is….

“Yes,” she says, surprised, tasting the word on her tongue. “Yes, I think I am.”

****

Diego and Mom should be arriving soon. Vanya checks the pizzas again. Still hot, at least. There are more than would be expected, considering forty percent of the guests will be unable to eat, but Luther (and to a lesser extent, Diego) have always been big eaters.

Not that anyone besides Diego will be eating the pile of vegetables masquerading as a pizza, anyways.

Vanya checks over everything again, before forcing herself to relax. It’s fine. Everything is *fine.* The food is out, the decorations (minimal, but Klaus and Raithe insisted on *some*) are up, a couple games are set aside in case they get desperate, and her brothers….

She blinks, and looks around.

….Damn it, she knew she was forgetting something.

Sighing, Vanya goes on a hunt through the house. It’s large enough to house six people more or less comfortably (although thank god half of them don’t ever need to use the bathroom, because there are only two in the entire place. Vanya suspects that’s why the house languished on the market for so long before they came by to scoop it up). Even if it’s not the Academy, there’s still plenty of ground to cover.

She ends up finding Raithe and Five first. Unsurprisingly, they're together. Five's room, on account of being the basement, is larger than any of the others, but he actually looked *happy* when he saw it, so no one had the heart to deny it to him. It's still unfurnished aside from an old futon the previous owners left behind in the corner, next to a stack of textbooks and chalkboards.

The glow of a small lamp on the ground is the only thing that illuminates the room. The light flickers across the faces of her brothers, lying on the futon together.

Five is clearly asleep. Raithe glances up as she comes down the stairs. He smiles, and wiggles the fingers of his free hand in greeting. The other is wrapped around Five, holding him close. Five's arm is stretched out over Raithe's chest in return.

"Hey, Van," Raithe says quietly. "Decided Five needed some shuteye before the party. Trust me, no one wants him cranky for that."

"Yeah," Vanya agrees. "That should be avoided."

She looks around the rest of the room. It's dark and empty, and she can't help but wonder what Five is going to do with all the space. Vanya herself is literally the only person in the house who has more possessions than she can carry (well, than she can carry without her powers). And Five has never really been one for material concerns.

"That's going to be his Chamber of Math over there," Raithe says, interrupting her train of thought and possibly reading her mind. At this point Vanya would hardly be surprised if he did. He nods to the corner opposite of the futon. "Prepare to see far, far too many numbers crammed in over there. And of course we're getting chalkboard paint for the whole place, but there's where he's going to sit and revolutionize physics. Behold."

"I'm honored," Vanya says, smiling slightly and glancing at the currently-bare corner of the room.

Raithe nods gravely. "Good," he says.

Five shifts slightly, his breath hitching. Instantly, all of Raithe's attention focuses on him. He hums, very softly, and runs a hand through Five's hair. Five relaxes again, and his breathing falls back into its former steady rhythm.

Raithe continues petting Five's hair. Vanya realizes that, for the moment, he's completely forgotten she exists.

She tries to shove away the familiar spike of hurt that produces. She's not entirely successful, but her swallow causes Raithe to blink and look up.

"Nightmare?" Vanya asks quickly, before he can comment on any expression she might have (she's still not used to having emotions in general, which often leads to others figuring out what she's feeling before she herself does. It can be helpful, but it's not something she wants to deal with right now).

"...Yeah," Raithe says, glancing between her and Five. "Happens sometimes. Or often. I'm, uh, probably going to be spending quite a few nights down here helping with that, just so you know. Nothing - *Flowers in the Basement*, though, promise."

Vanya lets out a huff of laughter. "It's *Flowers in the Attic.*"

"But that's Allison and Luther's spot," Raithe says innocently.

This time Vanya has to stifle her giggles with a hand. Raithe grins.

"Be nice," Vanya chides him, when she's managed to force down her mirth. "We said we'd be supportive. Even if it's weird."

And they have been. Even Diego has kept his comments to a minimum, which Vanya hadn't thought was possible. Of course, it *really* helps that Allison and Luther are all the way in L.A., where no one has to - see anything.

"Yes, yes, of course," Raithe says, waving his free hand. "Honestly, Vanya, you think I have a problem with it? Technically I am *also* guilty of the same, except *even moreso.*"

"Right," Vanya said, screwing up her face as she assiduously avoids thinking about Klaus and Raithe's - *thing* they have going on. Or how they and Dave often go around dazed and smug and (in Klaus' case) chronically sleep-deprived, with *enormous* grins attached to their face.

It's an exercise in willpower, but Vanya is determined to block it all out. Five is already a master of such, while Ben is just eternally resigned.

Raithe is grinning at her. Vanya pretends to have no idea why, and grabs a topic from thin air.

"Is it strange?" she asks him. "Being in a house again? You haven't really - had one, for a while."

'A while' is an understatement, of course. Vanya knows very well that Klaus has been homeless since he left the Academy, and he's been reacting to the house with a mix of awe and bewilderment. Raithe has an additional eighteen years in the apocalypse and four years as a transient assassin on top of that. And Five ran away at thirteen, and Ben left with Klaus….

At least Dave is normal, she consoles herself. Then she remembers that unless the afterlife counts, he's been homeless longer than any of them.

But Raithe shrugs. "Ehn," he says, looking around the basement again. "It's smaller than home, and of course less subterranean, but it's very nice. Like, absurdly nice. I'm kind of tempted to put up an actual picket fence, but I think that would just disturb everyone, honestly."

"Subterranean?" Vanya asks, blinking.

"Oh! Right," Raithe says. "The bunker. Back in the apocalypse. There were two of them, actually, and both were just the basements of the biggest libraries around, but, you know.

They were home." He peers at her. "Wait, you don't think we just went roving all around the place *Mad Max*-style, did you?"

"Oh," Vanya says, shaking her head. "I - no, sorry, of course not."

Of course they didn't, Vanya berates herself. Neither Five and Raithe really expand very much on their time in the apocalypse - at least, not around Vanya. They let out dribs and drabs, but nothing big. But of course they had a base. They were there for *eighteen years.* Over half of Five's lifetime, and - well, not a third of Raithe's *life*time, but a third of his existence.

Because of her.

It hits her, all over again, making her dizzy with realization, just *how much* she's stolen from her brothers in front of her. Five's childhood, Raithe's life, their siblings. A whole world.

"Vanya?" comes a sleepy voice.

She snaps out of her frozen state to look at Five. He blinks at her, and yawns. "Hey. Are people here?"

Vanya swallows. Twice. Then once more, until her voice can finally come out steady. "Not yet," she says, "but it's soon. You should probably get ready."

"Mmrgh," Five grumbles, flopping back on Raithe and closing his eyes. "No."

Raithe laughs. "You should probably go get everyone together, Vanya," he says, glancing at her. "I'll get him capable of standing upright. I have practice."

"Alright," Vanya says, giving him a smile, but he's already looking back at Five. That's alright. It's not one of her better ones, anyway.

She lingers for a moment, near the stairs, looking back at them on the futon. Five is still stubbornly clinging to Raithe and the last vestiges of sleep both, burrowing his face deeper into his brother's chest, like he couldn't imagine letting go if he tried. Raithe looks down at Five like there's no place in the world he'd rather be, like he'd shred mountains and move oceans and tear apart the very world just to be right here, right now, in this moment and no other.

Vanya looks away. She goes upstairs.

She finds Ben wandering around by the pizza. Her heart gives that familiar lurch to see him - lesser now than it was those first few days, but still there. He glances up at her entrance.

"Hey, Vanya," he says, then points at a box. "I think you accidentally ordered a vegetable garden by mistake."

"That one's Diego's," she tells him.

His face scrunches up, and he edges away from the box. "...Why."

“Because we love each other, and supporting each other even if we do strange and disturbing things is an essential part of expressing that,” Vanya tells him, quoting her therapist. Or, well. Paraphrasing.

Ben looks dubious, but just shakes his head. “If you’re looking to bring Klaus and Dave down, I wouldn’t go near their room for another fifteen minutes or so,” he informs her.

It takes a second to figure out what, precisely, he’s implying by that, and then her face screws up. “Ah. Noted.”

He looks amused. Vanya wonders, again, exactly why she’s moving in with these people.

“Raithe and Five should be up soon, though,” Vanya says, checking the clock and feeling proud of herself for not wavering as she says their names.

At least, she’s proud of herself until Ben frowns at her slightly, and says, “You okay?”

“What?” Vanya says. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.”

“Klaus says that a lot,” Ben remarks mildly. “Just like that, actually.”

Vanya stops. Takes a deep breath.

“...Ah,” Ben realizes. “It’s about Klaus? Or Raithe?”

“...Both,” Vanya admits, quietly.

Ben shifts on his feet, and for a moment he’s the very picture of a teenager, awkward and unsure. “I could - listen?” he says, hesitantly.

“It’s -” Vanya stops herself, and runs over what she wants to say in her mind. Its difficult, since she’s not even sure what she’s feeling, much less how to express it.

“....A lot of times, when I look at Klaus,” she says, eventually, picking each word carefully, “I have to push away the memories of him - dying. And it - I know he’s okay now, and he forgave me, and so did Raithe, but I *killed* them, Ben. I killed both of them. And I made that hell Raithe and Five had to live in for eighteen years, I made them bury their family, and I almost did it *again* because I fell for Leonard’s bullshit and a few goddamn *misunderstandings,* and then there’s Helen and those nannies Dad wrote about and even those assholes Leonard paid and - so many people have been hurt because of me, and I’ve hurt most of them directly myself. And Raithe and Klaus and Five forgave me, and Helen is alright with me taking her place, and Allison apologized and I never have to see Pogo or Dad again and you’re all saying you care about me and I’ve been given so much more than I deserve *but I still want more.*”

Vanya slaps a hand over her mouth.

“Uh,” Ben says, wide-eyed.

So Vanya starts crying.

“Shit,” she hears Ben say. Then he comes closer, and puts his arms around her. Against her better judgement, she leans into the hug, because fuck, two months ago she’d been able to count the number of hugs she’d ever had on one goddamned hand, and now she gets them whenever she wants. Even though she doesn’t deserve them, every part of her *craves* it, grasping for more, demanding she never let go.

Ben is clearly very inexperienced at giving hugs, but he gives it his best shot. Vanya huddles up to him and scrunches against his chest, feeling some deep part of her being soothed by the contact even as she continues crying.

“I’m sorry,” she says into his hoodie. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t - I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Ben says helplessly, and Vanya almost wants to laugh at that because no, it’s not okay. That’s why Raithe is so good at calming her down, because he never says pretty lies like that.

She keeps crying, and then she notices -

Her heartbeat is loud in her ears, like a song. She almost tries to shove it away, push down her emotions so they don’t explode out of her, before she remembers that’s the exact opposite of what she’s supposed to do. So instead she sucks in a deep breath, letting the sound flow through her like ~~Leonard taught~~ a gentle wave. Guiding it, not damming it up.

Slowly, it recedes, and so do her tears.

Vanya sniffles against Ben’s chest. Then she gently pushes herself away.

“Sorry,” she says, looking fixedly at the corner of the room.

“...Maybe spending over a decade around Klaus has rearranged my meter,” Ben says after a moment, “But I don’t think having a breakdown and crying is something you need to apologize for?”

“No, I -” Vanya shakes her head. Is he really going to make her say it out loud? “The other thing. About me being….”

“Selfish?” Ben says.

Vanya flinches. She closes her eyes and nods.

“I want *more,*” she confesses in a whisper. “I want - every time Raithe and Five look at each other like they’re the only important things in the world, or Dave and Klaus talk about pulling off a wedding with a ghost like it’s a foregone conclusion, or - fuck, even the way Five talks to Delores, I *want* that. I thought having you all care about me would be enough, but here I am thinking I’m not *special* enough even with that. After everything I’ve done - how fucking selfish is that?”

There’s a long, long silence.

Then Ben huffs out a laugh.

“Vanya,” he says. “Do you really think we’re any better?”

Vanya blinks her eyes open, and looks at him in surprise. “What?”

Ben shrugs, looking amused and exasperated and fond all at once. “Selfishness is a family trait, Vanya. We all have *way* too much of it. Luther’s only now realizing the world doesn’t revolve around being the leader. Diego does what he wants regardless of the consequences. Allison - well, you know. I could tell you *stories* about Klaus. And I - honestly, I don’t think I ever tried to get him clean for *him.* It was really mostly about me, and how I would have wanted to live. And Raithe and Five would burn the world for each other. Maybe literally, I’m not sure, and I’m really glad we never have to find out. Honestly, Vanya, being selfish makes you more like us than your powers do.”

She stands stock still, in the middle of the room, gaping at him.

“....Oh,” she says.

Then the doorbell rings.

They both jump slightly, looking over at it.

“Speak of the devil,” Ben says.

Vanya takes a deep breath, and goes over to open it.

Allison smiles at her. The sight sends a pang through Vanya’s chest, because she can see the hesitance in it. They - they’ve talked about the rumor. She knows Allison was only four. She knows that disobeying Dad was quite honestly unthinkable back then. She knows Allison didn’t understand what she was doing.

She’s still not sure whether she’ll ever be able to fully forgive her sister.

But everything has to start somewhere. So she smiles back, and goes in for a hug. Allison hugs back firmly, saying a soft, “hey, sis,” that has Vanya remembering their reunion for the funeral. Only this time, hopefully, won’t be such a clusterfuck.

“Hey,” Vanya says back, and glances over at Luther. She gives him the same smile. “Hey, Luther.”

He actually smiles back, which is enough to make her blink in surprise. Looking closer, he looks….different. Not physically, but something in the set of his shoulders, and the way he carries himself. Sort of - lighter. Freer.

L.A. must be good for him. Or, to put it differently, being anywhere but the Academy must be good for him.

Vanya invites them both in, and is about to close the door when another car pulls up. Diego gets out, followed by Mom.

“Vanya!” Mom calls out, waving. “Hello, darling. Oh, this house is beautiful. It looks just like a painting.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Vanya says, craning her head to look upwards.

Mom nods, a dreamy smile on her face. Her fingers close, like she wants to reach for something, but has to remind herself she’s not holding anything.

Maybe she’s thinking about sketching it. She does love her art class.

“I got you a present,” Diego informs Vanya as he comes to the door. He holds out a large bag. “Here.”

There isn’t any tissue paper blocking the view of the inside of the bag, so Vanya looks at it and blinks. “This is the frying pan we got you for *your* housewarming present,” she points out, bemused.

“Exactly,” Diego says. “I don’t need a frying pan.”

Vanya opens her mouth to tell him that’s not how it’s supposed to work, and actually they got him the pan in the hopes he would start *cooking* food like a *normal* person, then she reconsiders and closes it.

Not worth it.

Instead she shakes her head. “Well, come in. Shoes off, these are good floors. There’s pizza if you want it. That vegetable one.”

Diego brightens slightly. “Great. Mom, you good?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” Mom reassures him. She peers past Vanya into the house, and smiles. “Allison, Luther! It’s so good to see you again.” She walks over to them and starts asking about L.A.

“Alright!” Raithe says, bouncing into the room, Five following on his heels. “Let’s get this party started! Woo!”

It’s actually fairly low-key. They mostly stand around talking to each other, although to Vanya’s mortification there’s a recording of her music playing in the background. They do, in fact, end up breaking out the games, which is when they all find out that Raithe and Five are absolutely *vicious* when playing.

“There was *not* a lot to do during winter,” Raithe says in explanation, and then goes back to furiously paging through three foreign language dictionaries for his next Scrabble move.

After their game of Risk goes down in flames (“Just because the board doesn’t show there’s a nuclear reactor there doesn’t make it true, and we were the ones to install those backdoor codes. Trust me, you hold that thing hostage and frame the right people, and you can take over most of Central Asia.” “Fivey, you know I hate talking about Calhoun.”), they stick

strictly to games of chance. There's probably an incredible failure mode there as well, but at least it has plausible deniability.

Vanya takes a break around eleven. The feeling of being *included* still gives her a warm glow in her chest, but she's not entirely used to being around so many people for so long. She leans against the wall one room over from where her family is still playing Yahtzee, and looks out the window. It's dark out, and she can barely see the silhouette of Diego's car.

Taking a sip of her soda (tacitly, everyone silently agreed that this and any other family get-together was always going to be alcohol-free. They're all so proud of Klaus, and no one's going to risk it all coming undone), Vanya listens to the clatter of rolling dice and her siblings' laughter. It's both a familiar sound and not, because she can remember listening in on it as a child just like she is now, but for the first time she realizes just how *weighted* it was back then. Something to be treasured, like they only had a limited amount and wanted to savor it. Now, though, they laugh carelessly, like they know they'll never run out.

There's a soft *fmph*, something she couldn't fail to recognize even after seventeen years. Vanya glances over at Five.

He tilts his head and gives her a small smile. "Getting a little loud in there."

"YAHTZEE!!!" comes Klaus' delighted shriek. "Oh, fuck, that's so hot, victory smooch!"

Sounds of exaggerated disgust and protest rise in volume.

"Yeah," Vanya says, laughing slightly. "A little."

"Not really used to that," Five says, tucking his hand into a pocket. His eyes are distant. "Noise, I mean. I've acclimated somewhat over the last four and a half years, but before that….you'd be surprised at how quiet the world can get. Even with Klaus in it."

Vanya thinks, very suddenly and for no reason at all, of the cell underneath the Academy. Of the faint, blurry memories that form into nightmares of endless, creeping *silence,* clawing at her skin and filling her lungs and erasing the entire world.

"I don't think I would be," she says. "Surprised, I mean."

Five blinks at her.

"....I suppose you wouldn't," he says, a terrible sort of *knowing* in his eyes.

Vanya swallows, and looks away. She sets down her can and crosses her arms.

"What are you thinking about?" Five asks.

Briefly, Vanya wonders if she should resent the question. Five hardly ever asked that question when they were children - instead, she asked it of him, and he was always happy to talk about whatever science or math he was studying now. Looking back, whenever he asked her what she was thinking, it was mostly perfunctory, and he wasn't very interested in the answer.

But he still asked anyways.

Vanya sighs.

“Just….wondering why on Earth I’m doing this. *How* I’m doing this,” Vanya breathes, in and out, and soothes the faint roiling of her power under her skin. “I’ve spent so long wanting powers of my own. My entire life - well, I thought it was my entire life. I thought that would just….magically solve everything. Let me be part of the family, get me attention, *fix* everything wrong with me.”

That garners a faint huff of laughter from Five. “I think you missed the part where all our powers fucked us up to varying degrees. And attention isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to realize that,” Vanya mutters.

“....I am sorry you weren’t treated like part of the family, though,” Five says, his face growing more somber. “It was wrong of us to do that. I do love you.”

Vanya pulls in a deep breath.

It’s not the first time he’s said it. He’s made a point of saying very frequently, ever since Raithe brought her back to the Academy. He’s told her that he loves her, and that he’s sorry for how he acted, and that he forgives her. With how many times he’s said it, it should sound trite and meaningless by now.

It doesn’t. Five - the Five of her childhood, the sharp-edged boy of her memories - never said anything like that. He hated displaying vulnerability, or a care for other people. But that didn’t mean he had none. All of their siblings might have thought that, to varying degrees, but Vanya had always taken pride in the fact that she was the only one who knew otherwise. That despite his actions, she was the only one who could look past that and understand that he did love them, even if he never said it.

It made her feel special.

She looks at Five, now willing and able to tell his siblings he loves them whenever he wants. To tell *her.*

“I love you too,” she tells him.

Their family’s voices raise slightly from the other room. Something about cheating? Vanya wonders how one would cheat at Yahtzee.

“....Are you okay?” Five asks. His fingers worry at the edge of his shirt, an uncharacteristic tell of nervousness. Or, well, maybe it’s entirely characteristic. Five has changed so very much in the past twenty-two years. “With what happened today, with - Marion.”

Vanya winces. She takes a deep breath, and really thinks about her answer.

“Yes,” she says. It’s a relief to find her opinion hasn’t changed. “Yes, I’m okay. It was - good, to have that. Closure. I didn’t expect that.”

“I know it did Kl-Raithe well,” Five muses. He still refers to Raithe as Klaus more often than not when addressing the man, but uses the codename when talking to other people. “He doesn’t regret what he did to The Commission, but I know he wondered about everyone who survived.”

Vanya shifts uncomfortably at the topic most of the family tries to avoid discussing. Learning the bare bones of what Raithe did to get back to Five was….fraught. But out of all of them, Vanya is the least qualified to pass judgement, so she remains quiet.

Five blinks and shakes his head, snapping out of whatever memory he’s mired in. “Anyways. That’s - really the last of it, I suppose. I’ll be keeping an eye on probabilities, of course, but both The Commission and the apocalypse are….done.”

There’s a faint, almost incredulous look on Five’s face. Vanya studies it.

“That’s good,” she ventures, after a few moments of silence.

“Yeah,” Five says, distantly, staring past her out the window. “Yeah, it is. It’s what I’ve been working towards my whole life.”

What about before you knew about it? Vanya wants to ask, but she thinks she understands. For Five, his childhood *is* an entirely different life.

“And now that I’ve succeeded, I have to deal with After,” Five says. His lips quirk upwards slightly, and she can *hear* the capitalization. “Raithe tried to prepare me for it, you know. After. But most times I just couldn’t see it.” He takes a long, slow breath, and looks at her. “When I could, though, you were always there.”

Vanya’s breath catches in her throat. “What?”

Five nods. “Whenever I pictured After, I wanted you to feature somehow,” he says. “The details shifted a lot, and I never pictured actually *living* with you,” he huffs out a laugh, glancing around the room, “But - I’ve always loved you, Vanya. I couldn’t picture a happy life without you in it.”

Her vision grows blurry, and tears drip down her face. Vanya hurriedly wipes them away.

“Oh,” she says, voice rough and scratchy. Her power pulses, the *clatter* of shaken dice and bright bursts of her siblings’ laughter catching in her ears. “Oh.”

A hand tugs down her arm, and Five hugs her.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs.

Vanya sags against him, feeling hollow and wretched and so, so free.

“It’s not,” she says quietly. “It’s better than it was, but it’s not - okay.”

She can’t see Five’s face, but he seems to be deliberating.

“You’re right,” he says at last. “It’s not okay. But….we’re getting there. We’ll get there.”

Vanya closes her eyes.

“Okay,” she whispers. “Okay.”

Her power ebbs back again. She takes a deep breath, and feels it swell inside of her, falling back as she exhales. The gentle rhythm soothes her, reminds her that she doesn’t have to use it for destructive ends, or even use it at all.

Vanya stands together with her brother, listening to her family, and feels as her power swells and falls, ebbs and flows, comes and goes in waves.

End Notes

....And there you have it. The end.

I want to thank you all so much, once again. This has been some of the best months I've ever had, and I'm so happy I finally got to write something so large and well-recieved.

(As an aside note, I've recently finished writing a book. It hasn't been published yet, but I figure some shameless self-promotion is in order. I'll post an announcement when it goes on sale.)

'Comes and Goes (in Waves)' is the longst thing I've ever written, and I'm fairly sure it's also the best. I'm so glad I got to share it with you all, and that you like it all so much. Thank you so much, everyone!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!